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STREET IN THE CITY OF MEISSEN, ON THE ELBE.

THE ILLUSTRATED
MAGAZINE OF ART.

MEISSEN ON THE ELBE.

OUR illustration shows the little river Meise, flowing through the narrow street of a picturesque old town. We are struck by the beauty of the shadowy foliage, the quaintness of the buildings, the old castle on its rocky height, the exquisite tracery of the cathedral spire, and our interest is increased, when we learn that this is Meissen on the Elbe, where, in 1710, the materials and fabrication of porcelain were, after many weary trials, discovered and perfected for the first time in Europe. Never since then has its furnace-fires died out; and the porcelain manufactory, peacefully enshrined in the old feudal castle we behold, sends forth to the tables of kings and nobles, and the cabinets of the wealthy, those masterpieces of ceramic art known as Dresden china. It seems as though the centres of fickle art were necessarily associated with the picturesque and lovely in nature. The classic Etruria was embosomed amidst hills and vineyards; the manufacturing cities of Asia-Minor looked out upon blue seas and golden sands; and this little town of Meissen, not a whit less lovely in its way, stands on the green undulating shore of the Elbe, with a noble bridge across the wide and rapid stream, and beyond a road—a ceaseless avenue of trees—that at the end of fourteen miles brings the traveller to the walls of Dresden—not inaptly called the “Florence of Germany.” It is indeed an art-city—with its library of 250,000 volumes, its incomparable picture-gallery, in which hang masterpieces of Raphael, Coreggio, Titian, Paul Veronese, Carlo Dolci, Julio Roman, Guido, and Tintoretto, and a collection of home and foreign porcelain, that, containing 60,000 pieces, is barely enshrined in eighteen rooms! Such a place is worthy of possessing, as it does, a modern Veii or Tarquinii, with its chemists, its fabricators, and its artists, amidst the vineyards of its neighbouring hills.

Art, in all its branches, bears so obvious a relation to the character and degrees of civilisation, as to be no other than a relative term. To say that art dies, is in our opinion a minor sort of atheism; to lament that types of it become extinct, as far as creativeness goes, is a fallacy begotten by ignorance. Were its creative and fabricating power ever so masterly, no modern nation would think of exhausting the wonders of ceramic art to form lachrymatories for tears, and urns for the ashes of the dead; for the simple reason, that the sentiment necessary to such a type of art passed away with the barren philosophy and morals of the classic ages. When it rose again in its new birth, its character was wholly changed. Acted upon, though unconsciously, by the dawning spirit of a new and great age, men now sought to make *utility* the foundation of art. This they did coarsely, rudely enough at first, particularly in relation to what was fickle; but at length, as they advanced, as the truth began to dawn upon them, that *UTILITY* would still be more divinely served through an alliance with *BEAUTY*, then, like eager children, they sought far and wide to give effect to this first glimpse of a divine idea. Simultaneously, yet without concert, they strove to this end in many countries, through many difficulties and hindrances, by many methods—the honour at length falling upon the little town of Meissen on the Elbe, in Saxony.

From the date of the tenth to the nineteenth century, much had been done in Europe—by the Moors in the

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Spanish peninsula, by the Italians at Faenza in the States of the Church, and by the Dutch, and French, in the improving and glazing of earthenware. But when, in 1518, the Portuguese began the importation into Europe of the exquisitely fabricated, though ill-shaped, porcelain of China, it was soon seen, as this passed commercially from hand to hand, that much had to be discovered, as well as practised, before the exquisite hardness, glaze, and pellucidity of the Chinese porcelain could be imitated. The spirit of eager inquiry was roused in all directions. In England it took its usual healthy course, that of individual enterprise: in other countries, less emancipated from feudal influences, royal and governmental patronage stepped in with effects and institutions that continue to this hour.

The great need was to discover a clay like that called by the Chinese “kaolin,” for by this time moulding, baking, turning, and other operations of the potter’s art were well understood. At length this was effected by an accident, only rivalled by one to which Astbury, the English potter, owed his greatest fickle improvements. Previous to this, in 1701, a youth named Böttger, apprenticed to an apothecary of Berlin, began to be widely known for his reputed skill in alchemy. He pretended, and probably believed, that his researches in the transmutation of metals would lead to the fabrication of gold. These reports reaching the King of Prussia, Frederick William I., he manifested so much interest as to alarm the apothecary’s apprentice, who, fearing he might be seized for the purpose of extracting his secret, fled from Berlin into the state of Saxony. He was, however, pursued and arrested at Dresden; but Frederick Augustus I., King of Poland, and elector of Saxony, sharing in some degree the King of Prussia’s belief in the virtues of alchemy, refused to surrender Böttger, or the *Maker of Gold*, as he was more popularly called. He was conducted to Wirtemburg, and consigned to what might be considered solitary imprisonment, though supplied with all the means of pursuing his chemical researches, and treated with great kindness and consideration. With an abnegation, or rather an unconsciousness of what constitutes the rights of personal liberty, that reads more like a fact of the twelfth than of the commencement of the eighteenth century, this strict surveillance was continued over Böttger, the elector wishing to secure to himself the prospective *golden* results of his researches. These, as might be expected, were looked for in vain; and ceasing, perhaps, at length to have faith in their probability, the Elector placed Böttger in communication with a person named Tschirnhaus, who had been engaged for some time in experimental researches relating to the fabrication of porcelain. The elector possibly thought, and wisely too, that the skill and chemical knowledge which had failed in solving the secret of the transmutation of metals, might, in a more practical direction, assist in the coveted discovery of the ingredients of which porcelain was composed. Tschirnhaus, who had already succeeded in discovering a clay in the neighbourhood of Dresden of value, though not of the kind sought, for it had neither whiteness, translucency, or fineness, wisely seconded the elector’s new opinion, and dissuading Böttger from the further pursuit of experiments so barren of result as his had been, led him, at length, to become his co-operator in researches not only

eminently practical, but likely to result both in wealth and fame.

These experiments were carried on with a degree of mystery that reminds one of the old alchemists. The better to secure them from observation, the elector gave up his chateau, or castle, of Albrechtsburg, at Meissen, to the two experimentalists, for whose use a laboratory was fitted up and workmen supplied. Here everything was done to render their life agreeable consistent with the strictest surveillance, especially as regarded Böttger, who was never for a moment permitted to escape the sight of the officer constantly attending him. It was feared he might escape and bestow his secrets elsewhere. In 1706, when Charles XII. entered Saxony, Böttger, Tschirnhaus, and three of their workmen, were conveyed under an escort of cavalry to the fortress of Koenigstein : hither their laboratory was removed, and here they remained a year closely guarded, the elector fearing their seizure by the King of Sweden as much apparently as he did his crown.

After a year's seclusion at Koenigstein they were brought to Dresden, and lodged in the Jung Ferbastei, which was fitted up for their use with a laboratory. Here they renewed their labours for the improvement of porcelain, and especially such researches as might touch the secret of its component parts. Their labours were extraordinary and incessant, approached only in intensity and endurance by those of the admirable Bernard de Palissy. The elector often assisted personally at these long vigils and extraordinary labours ; still the results, though in some degree successful, did not reach the discovery of a true porcelain. It was still stoneware, not china.

In 1708 Tschirnhaus died. Soon after, accident revealed to Böttger the secret that experiments had failed to produce. Henceforth his name became associated with the discovery of kaolin, or china clay, and that of Dresden with an exquisite advance in ceramic art. The assistance of accident must not rob Böttger of a particle of his worth as a fine experimentalist and chemist. Had his mind not been directed to this object by previous research and study, the accident would have passed by, as accidents commonly do, without notice, or, at least, without producing effects ; but already a master of induction, already aware, in the beautiful sense of one of Bacon's immortal aphorisms, that "nature is only subdued by submission,"* he seized the accident, caused it to become experiment, and produced, therefore, an immense advance in connexion with one of the loveliest arts that moulds and increases civilisation.

Böttger wore a wig and used hair powder as was the custom of his time. Happening one day to take in his hand the packet of powder supplied by his valet, he was struck by its extraordinary weight, and, on inquiry, learnt that it was a new mineral powder lately introduced by an iron-master named Schnorr, in place of the vegetable powder formerly in use. It occurred at once to Böttger that an earthy material of this whiteness might serve the purpose he had so long needed ; he made experiments, and the results were perfect. Schnorr was applied to, and from him it was learnt that passing on horseback along a road near Aue, he observed it to be covered with a white and soft clay, from which his horse raised its feet with difficulty. It occurred to him that this mud or clay might, if dried, calcined, and prepared, be converted into a mineral hair powder. He therefore brought home a sample of the clay, was successful in producing from it a fine white powder, which in a short time became an important article of commerce.

The place from which Schnorr drew his supplies was now examined, and it proved to be a vein of fine kaolin, identical in all its properties with that which constituted the material of the porcelain of China. Its exportation was at once prohibited by the elector under severe penalties, and it was transported to the porcelain works of Böttger in sealed barrels. Its use in the fabrication of Dresden china was also concealed with extraordinary precaution. An oath of secrecy till death,

was imposed upon all persons employed in the works, as likewise a solemn declaration monthly from the foreman of the different departments of the manufactory. It was also inscribed upon all the doors of the workshops, that all who betrayed the secret of the place should be imprisoned for life in the fortress of Koenigstein.

A clay being thus discovered which rivalled that of China and Japan, the elector established a royal manufacture of porcelain at the chateau of Albrechtsburg, at Meissen, to which Böttger was appointed director. This castle or palace had been formerly the common residence of the margraves, burgraves, and bishops of Meissen ; but the margraves transferring their residence to Dresden in the thirteenth century, it was afterwards rebuilt in 1471. As it stands in our illustration, crowning the rocky height, it looks exactly the place where a jealous state secret might, with some success, be guarded. To this end it was, as soon as the porcelain manufacture was established, subjected to the conditions and discipline of a fortress. It was approached by a drawbridge, which was never lowered except at night, and the entrance was interdicted to all except those employed in the manufactory. Even when the elector introduced distinguished strangers to see the works, all the processes of manufacture were carefully concealed from them.

But secrets of this kind, depending on the wants and tastes of men, it is impossible to keep ; and Meissen had no escape from the usual law. Through deserters and other means, but principally at the date when Frederick the Great, conquering Saxony, transferred some of the workmen from Meissen to Berlin, porcelain manufactories were established elsewhere : at Vienna, at Nymphenburg, near Munich, at Louisville, near Stuttgart, at Berlin, Copenhagen, Brunswick, and St. Petersburg. So late as the year 1812, when M. Brogniart, director of the royal manufactory at Sèvres, visited Germany at the command of Napoleon, M. Kahn, director of the works at Meissen, had to be specially released from his oath of exclusion before M. Brogniart was admitted.

Regarded in a commercial sense, these royal manufactories, supported by state subsidies, and encouraged by state patronage, cannot be said to bear more than an artistic relation to the great field of fictile enterprise and competition. As schools of artistic excellence they are invaluable ; but as sources for the ceramic needs of civilisation they are useless. It is competition and enterprise that spreads the tables of the world ; as our own wonderful exports under the head of "earthenware" prove. Formerly, we imported large quantities of inferior china from France and Holland ; now we export to Germany alone upwards of 2,128,471 pieces of earthenware per annum, at a declared value of £25,669. This was in 1844, the date of the last returns ; since then, both export and value have largely increased, and prove that a monopoly carried on irrespective of commercial profit, may stimulate exertion to the advance of art, but has limits that fall necessarily far below the needful averages of supply and demand.

Meissen contributed some of the rarest treasures of ceramic art sent to the Great Exhibition. Two vases of light blue, with the portraits of the Queen and Prince Albert, were, as it may be recollect, of exceeding beauty. A girl playing a guitar, with laces ; a fluteplayer, an étagere with girandoles in flowers in relief ; a picture of the lacemaker, after Slingeslandt, and a figure of Ganymede, after Thorwaldsen, were also amongst the richest productions. But the *chef-d'oeuvres* were two collections of paintings on china, after classical pictures by the well-known artists of Dresden, MM. Walther and Bucker. The camelia japonica in porcelain, though wonderful as a work of art, must be reckoned as objectionable in taste : there are provinces of nature it is worse than useless to imitate ; and the floral abundance of the seasons is sufficient, without the vain attempt to create a likeness at the potter's wheel.

May the château of Albrechtsburg long overlook the blue and flowing Elbe, its green hills and purple vineyards, and help through artistic ministration to perfect and exalt nature !

* Novum Organum, Lib. i. Aph. 3.